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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000568

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/WERNER/SINGH/DORAN

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV PHUM PINS LE SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: AOUN EAGER FOR LAHOUD'S GRACEFUL  
DEPARTURE AND HIS OWN PRESIDENCY

Classified By: JEFFREY FELTMAN, AMBASSADOR. REASONS SECTION 1.4(B)

¶1. (C) Summary: Michel Aoun was in a good mood as he greeted the Ambassador for their February 22 meeting. The former General said he was encouraged by the anti-Lahoud tone taken by Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, and he insisted that Sfeir was not referring to him when Sfeir said the next president should not be a military man. Aoun said he would attend the dialogue called by Speaker Nabih Berri and that he was open to discuss all issues, including the presidency. Aoun hoped the dialogue could end talk of popular demonstrations to oust president Lahoud. Aoun was ready to consider all options for removing the president, but these options must include a decision on who will follow Lahoud. Aoun rejected any interim solution that might allow a caretaker president to complete Lahoud's term until new elections can be held. He insisted that the parliamentary majority must deal with him as a powerful Christian leader. On an encouraging note, Aoun said Ghattas Khoury had approached him with the names of two representatives of the March 14 Coalition who will "work with the Aounists." Aoun will appoint two of his own people to pursue discussions. Since signing the memorandum of understanding with Hizballah, Aoun said he has had no further developments in his dialogue with Hizballah. End summary.

MY WORDS WERE NOT A THREAT,  
BUT A CAUTION

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¶2. (C) On February 22, the Ambassador and Polchief met with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun, accompanied by his ubiquitous son-in-law/advisor Gibran Bassil. The Ambassador began the meeting by sharing with Aoun USG concern that Aoun's recent comments about potential confessional violence in Beirut might be seen locally as a threat. (Note: The press has reported that Aoun said if there are March 14 Coalition-inspired riots in and around the presidential palace in Baabda, Solidere (in central Beirut) could burn. End note.) Aoun said he only meant to warn the March 14th group that a demonstration in Baabda might be met by a violent response from irresponsible elements. His remarks were in no way meant to incite violence or to threaten the March 14th movement. Referring to February 5 riots in Beirut, Aoun said he wanted certain people to know that they cannot control events as well as they would like. Aoun said that the proposed demonstration to remove President Lahoud would be passing through heavily populated areas where "everyone has their personal arms." Recalling the start of the civil war, Aoun said he had experienced first hand how a small incident can escalate into widespread violence. "It is easy to begin these things, but difficult to control them." Aoun agreed with the Ambassador that the volatile rhetoric

from the political class was increasing the possibility of violence in Lebanon. Aoun singled out Samir Ja'ja' -- "his speeches sound like war speeches", and Walid Jumblatt -- "he has gone too far."

LAHOUD MUST GO. BUT GENTLY

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¶3. (C) The Ambassador told Aoun that the USG thought it was time for Lahoud to leave. The international community, and Lebanese institutions are ignoring Lahoud, making the post effectively vacant. Lahoud has no credibility. However, we were concerned that, in the current atmosphere, any demonstration to oust Lahoud might turn violent. The USG opposed any use of violence to achieve political ends; those who wish to remove Lahoud should do so through peaceful means. The Ambassador explained we would share that message with members of the March 14 movement.

¶4. (C) Aoun admitted that there was growing consensus for Lahoud's removal, but he rejected the notion that Lahoud might leave his post early as part of a compromise to bring in Aoun as an interim president to complete the remaining 20 months of Lahoud's term. "This is not constitutional," Aoun insisted. Additionally, Aoun said an interim president would not have the authority or power to deal with Lebanon's problems. A two-year interim president would mean two more years of political deadlock in the country, according to Aoun. "We must bring respect to the position of president," Aoun announced.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador assured Aoun that the USG wanted Lahoud's removal to be legal and peaceful. Aoun agreed with the Ambassador that Patriarch Sfeir, in a press interview, had been clear in his support for Lahoud's peaceful and

BEIRUT 00000568 002 OF 003

orderly departure. Aoun said that there was no constitutional means to remove Lahoud from office without the 2/3 vote of the parliament. Aoun assured the ambassador that the anti-Lahoud forces did not have the votes to take effective action against the president. So failing a parliamentary compromise, the constitution would have to be altered to allow for Lahoud's premature departure. The Ambassador noted that some are concerned that the March 14 ultimatum for Lahoud's departure might have been a tactical mistake. Now, all Lahoud had to do to defeat his opponents was remain in office. When the Ambassador asked Aoun about the Patriarch's comment to reporters that the next president should not be a military man, Aoun was quick to point out Sfeir's correction that, "some people have become civilians and are no longer military men," was aimed at Aoun. (Note: In a private conversation with the ambassador in January, the Patriarch unequivocally said he did not want Aoun to be President of the Republic. End note.)

I AM OPEN FOR DIALOGUE. BUT  
THE MAJORITY CANNOT IGNORE MY POWER

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¶6. (C) Aoun said he feared that the March 14 movement feels unjustifiably powerful. Relying on the support of the international community, they are bypassing the Parliament and the constitution to take their case to the streets. He warned that it is not prudent for a Sunni-Druze alliance to attempt to overturn the presidency, and redraft the constitution. Aoun said that if the Lebanese people feel neglected by the parliamentary majority, they will not support government programs or UNSCR 1559. Aoun questioned Hariri's right to claim leadership of the parliamentary majority. According to Aoun, his own FPM party is still contesting ten parliamentary seats from the 2005 elections. If the competent constitutional commission decided to overturn the elections in those ten constituencies, the power balance in parliament could shift. However, Aoun admitted it unlikely that the commission would rule in his favor.

¶ 7. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun if the Berri dialogue called for March 2-3 might be a way out of the potential showdown over Lahoud. Aoun said that his party was ready to participate in the dialogue called by Nabih Berri. Aoun claimed to have no pre-conceived agenda or redlines for the meeting. He was prepared to discuss matters openly with all parties. The Ambassador explained that the USG hoped that some form of dialogue would result in a real framework for solutions to Lebanon's troubles and allow for a peaceful resolution of the presidential problem. Aoun said he was willing to consider all peaceful, constitutional options for changing the President, including the option of changing the government before removing the president. However, Aoun insisted that he would only want to participate in a government if that government had real power to implement change. The Ambassador pointed out that Prime Minister Siniora was still working on his anticipated economic reform plan. Aoun said that the Prime Minister had not shared the details of his plan with the political parties. Aoun said his economic experts had developed their own ideas which they were preparing in response to the eventual government submission to parliament.

¶ 8. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun how he and Samir Ja'ja' had arrived at the recent compromise that allowed Pierre Daccashe to run uncontested for the recently vacant Baabda-Aley Maronite parliamentary seat. Aoun said he allowed the other candidates "an honorable out." He explained that his overwhelming support in the district intimidated the others into withdrawing their candidacies. But Aoun did not explain how Pierre Daccashe, a failed candidate on Aoun's electoral ballot, was selected as a compromise candidate between the Lebanese forces of Samir Ja'ja' and Aoun's supporters. Aoun said only that he allowed Ja'ja' to announce that Aoun was joining him in support for Daccashe.

PRO-SYRIAN SUPPORTERS ARE NEITHER SOUGHT, NOR SHUNNED

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¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador advised Aoun that one of the problems people had with an Aoun presidency had to do with Aoun's questionable supporters. Comments by Hizballah on the Baabda-Aley election compromise were not helpful. Old-line, unreconstructed pro-Syrians like Suleiman Franjieh and Talal Arslan speak out in support of Aoun and tar him with a pro-Syrian brush. Aoun said he had never asked for support

BEIRUT 00000568 003 OF 003

from these pro-Syrian leaders. Then he turned to Bassil with a smile and said, "Go ahead, begin a new campaign, 'Thank you for your support, now don't do it anymore.'" Aoun went on to defend himself saying that the pro-Syrian camp was "shouting so that people would know they are there," implying that Talal, Franjieh and others rally to Aoun to avoid being marginalized by Hariri. The Ambassador cautioned Aoun that pro-Syrian forces were using him. Aoun rejected this notion saying, "They know me. They have a fight with March 14." Aoun said that the March 14 Coalition and his party were "building bridges." To prove this, he produced a paper that was delivered to him by the March 14 movement. In the document, Aoun was given the name of two March 14 deputies who would serve as his interlocutors in discussions with the parliamentary majority. Aoun told the Ambassador that he would respond to the March 14 overture with two names of his own to pursue the dialogue.

I CAN HELP HIZBALLAH COME AROUND  
-- JUST YOU WAIT AND SEE

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¶ 10. (C) Defending his memorandum of understanding with Hizballah, Aoun pointed out that Saad Hariri had been forward-leaning in his own defense of the "resistance." The Ambassador said that some of what Saad Hariri has said about

Hizballah, like Aoun's paper with Hizballah, crosses redlines for us. The Ambassador pointed out that Hariri and others echo Aoun's own claims that they can bring Hizballah "into the tent" by dialogue and limited concessions. Aoun was amused by the notion that both he and Saad Hariri were saying the same things about Hizballah, and said, "let us do it together." Then, aided by Bassil, Aoun again reviewed the virtues of his memorandum with Hizballah and assured the Ambassador that the steps Aoun has taken will lead to Hizballah's compliance with UNSCR 1559. Bassil intervened and said he had made the rounds of many parties and organizations explaining their agreement with Hizballah and no one could find fault with what they had accomplished. Bassil said that even Siniora found no fundamental fault with the document. The Ambassador explained that we had heard the agreement criticized as part of a pattern of unilateral or bilateral actions undertaken by Aoun and presented to other parties as a fait accompli, rather than a topic for dialogue. Aoun responded that he made no demands for agreement from other parties. He understood that much of what was begun by the memorandum would have to be undertaken by the GOL, but the memorandum was a start. "Hizballah needs to feel respected by the other parties." Aoun said that he saw no sign that his agreement with Hizballah had caused any internal tensions for the Shia group. He said that Nasrallah made concessions confidently on major issues and did not seem to be negotiating with hard-liners in his own ranks. The Ambassador expressed the USG's desire for a broad political dialogue, but he also expressed our severe reservations about the utility of the memorandum and the sincerity of Hizballah.

¶11. (C) Comment: Aoun's remarks about confessional violence may not have been meant as a threat. However, as they were issued in a typically gruff Aoun-tone the formal General could have foreseen the danger his remarks would have been misunderstood or misused. There are concepts Michel Aoun cannot grasp: 1) he is being used by pro-Syrians and Syria to disrupt politics in Lebanon; 2) the Patriarch does not want him to replace Lahoud; and 3) he is not undisputed leader of the Christians. No amount of explaining or cajoling will bring Aoun to accept these concepts. Given his convictions, we do not expect him to break with the pro-Syrian supporters who are clinging to him, nor can we expect him to negotiate openly for any presidential solution that does not place Aoun in the Baabda palace. End comment.

FELTMAN